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FRANCE

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The Republic

By K.A. Dilday

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PARIS—France's legendary tradition of debate and philosophical discussion is in full bloom during "*la rentrée*" (the re-entry), the early fall season when everyone has returned from the long summer vacation and academic and cultural life begins anew. I took advantage of the myriad offerings to try to understand the concept of the republic, one that French lawmakers, philosophers and ordinary citizens believe in strongly and defend fiercely.

France is now 48 years into its fifth republic. The characteristics of a republic are constantly referred to in sociopolitical discourse, both casual and governmental. Phrases like "the republican ideal," "republican values," and the classic that ends many a French politician's speech — "*Vive la République*," are ubiquitous. Note that it is not "Long live France," but "Long live the Republic." The republic is inseparable from the concept of France.

Political philosophy is prominent in France's public forum and the contrast of a republic and a democracy is a well-worn topic. But when one examines the basic definition of the two political systems; it seems that neither excludes the other. A democracy is a state with majority rule, a republic is a state without a king. While some definitions of a republic stipulate that the head of state must be directly elected by the people, that has only been the case in France since 1962.

Yet the French speak of "republican ideals" casually, as if they are established concepts. But in searching several political dictionaries I found little agreement as to what sets a republic apart from a democracy. Faced with such a loose concept of a political system, yet a fierce belief built on republican identity, French political theorists have devoted miles of words to creating their own definition of republic, defining France. "*La République*" is France and France is "*La République*," but to refer to republican ideals with a lower case "r" is misleading. The "Republican values" that the French constantly refer to are an entirely French creation grafted on to the thinnest of technical definitions. Thus, in writing about the French republic, and what they refer to as republican ideals it is more appropriate to use a capital "R," since they are unique, derived from subjective decisions rather than a standardized one.

Most people in France agree that the Republic is characterized by a representative government elected by a nation of equals to pursue the public good according to an established set of principles. Although this can be said of many liberal democracies, among them, the United States, the French consider countries like the U.S. and Britain to be ruined by chronic inequality due to the prevalence of bifurcated identities causing schizophrenic civic responsibility. In public life one is French, period. But an Arab-American or a Caribbean-Brit would likely counter that her hyphenated identity aids in the pursuit of the elusive ideal of true equality among countrymen.

This difference in perspective was apparent at several conferences I attended during "*la rentrée*," among them, the 50th Anniversary of the 1st Conference of Black Writers and Artists. The conference was a joint project of *Présence Africaine*, a publishing house in France, the W.E.B. Du Bois Center of Harvard University and UNESCO. African, Franco-African and American academics and interested

public met over three days at UNESCO, the Paris-based scientific, cultural and educational wing of the United Nations. At one point Howard Dodson, the director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of the New York Public Library, gave a rousing presentation closing with: "And I want you to ask yourself, every day. What have I done for black people today?"

It is a measure of how much I have absorbed the French way of life in that his statement and style of speech, one that regularly booms from pulpits in black churches and social forums in the United States, was jarring. Oh dear, I thought and looked around nervously. His comment was a classic example of communitarianism and we don't talk like that in France.

In French political discourse, "*le communautarisme*" is almost always used as an insult. It is antithetical to the core beliefs at the heart of the Republic. French citizens are encouraged to press issues through discourse that engages with the entire populace. They are discouraged from creating associations based on shared beliefs or identities having to do with traits such as religion, race, ethnicity or national heritage. Any allegiance other than an intellectual one is discouraged.

In 1995, the philosopher Regis Debray wrote a now oft-cited essay, "Are you a democrat or a republican?" He laid out the difference between the two, among them that the nerve centers of a republic are the town hall and the school, while the nerve centers of a democracy are the temple and the drugstore or the cathedral and stock market. He also wrote "a republic doesn't have black mayors, yellow senators, Jewish ministers or atheist headmasters. It is a democracy that has black governors, white mayors and Mormon senators." Well, in 2006, it is the conference on the history of immigration and the colonial question at the National Library in Paris that has about 50 white presenters and less than a handful of people of color.

I attended that immigration conference sponsored by the national museum of the history of immigration the week after the Black Writers and Artists Panel. After the break following the opening presentations, I began chatting to Jean Emmanuel Kamtchueng, a French academic of Cameroonian heritage representing Africa House, an organization in Toulouse. He was not presenting, but had come to hear the discussions. "What do you think so far?" I asked. "I think there are no Africans," he said. "Perhaps I will ask them if they left them all out because they are planning to focus on sub-Saharan Africans next year." He was right. Of some 70 names listed as presenting, I saw none that I could identify as of sub-Saharan African origin. I spoke with Mr. Kamtchueng on the final day and he said there had been no surprises.

I asked another woman of Chinese ancestry (but whose family had come to southern France from Madagascar) what she thought of the events. She said the same thing: "Not very diverse." They made these comments quietly to me. To say things like that in France draws the accusation of "*le communautarisme*." There are no black or white or Muslim or Christian academics in the Republic.

At the end of the conference panelists were invited to visit the site of the new national museum of immigration, the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*, a former palace at the southeast edge of France and I was allowed to tag along.

Jacques Toubon, member of the center right party, and one of France's representatives to the European Parliament, has been actively involved in the development of the museum. He led the tour explaining that because of the structure of the building, and the size of the foyer, most of the museum will be on the second floor. But two grand rooms on the first floor, one on each end of the hall are the first rooms that visitors will see. These rooms, which are not insubstantial in size, will be replicas of a colonial administrator's office. When Mr. Toubon said this I initially believed that I had misunderstood, because the reality was so shocking. In the United States that would be the punch-line to a joke. It was akin to having a museum of black American history in the United States and making the first room a replica of a slave-owner's house. It is not a museum of colonialism, but of immigration. But lately there has been a movement in France to revisit the prevailing view of colonialism and acknowledge that it did have positive contributions akin to Cecil Rhodes insistence that colonialism was "philanthropy plus 5 percent." Last year a law was passed requiring French history books to present a more positive view of colonialism. The law supposedly slipped in as a little-noticed codicil to another law. It lasted for approximately a year before an Internet petition compelled

President Chirac to ask the national constitutional council to overturn it, which it did this January.

This theme, about the lack of representation and visibility for minorities in France is a constant in my newsletters because it is a constant in French culture. Individual instances can be dismissed as coincidence, or happenstance, but the recurrence indicates the flaw in the French concept of the Republic. The traditional belief has been that the Republic, a society of equals, is self-correcting and a meritocracy. Like Plato's Guardians, in the Republic, those in power can be trusted to provide for the greater good. But while France may be able to preserve these Republican principles politically, socially it is a democracy, one where the majority holds positions of power, allies with one another, hires one another and votes one another into office. The Republic's defenders



The poster for the 2006 50th anniversary conference of Black Writers and Artists. Picasso drew this head for the first conference in 1956.

are loathe to acknowledge this reality. The Republic's critics have begun to point this syndrome out, and calling it a more pervasive form of communitarianism, thus turning a staunch Republican's favorite insult around.

During the riots of 2005, Jack Lang, a former minister of culture in a socialist government, accused the centre right of a "white communitarianism of privilege, a war of clan and class against the poor." During the same crisis, Tariq Ramadan, the controversial Swiss-Muslim scholar who lectures frequently in France, told Agence France Press: "We are obsessed by religious communitarianism but we don't see the socio-economic communitarianism that is a gangrene in France with ghettoized *banlieues* on one side, residential spaces for the wealthiest and then another for the middle class."

France fears becoming Britain. French politicians often cite the U.K. as an example of the worst sort of communitarianism: a society where members of ethnic groups associate only with one another. But the reality is that many parts of France are already like that. While the communitarian neighborhoods and small cities of Britain (those that fall along ethnic and racial lines) often include people of different socio-economic position, in France, poor immigrants, many of whom are from Africa, live in cramped conditions in poor neighborhoods. I live in northern Paris, but 10 minutes on the metro and I emerge in Africa. As soon as you exit the Fort d'Aubervilliers stop in the *banlieue* Aubervilliers, a *mélange* of people dressed in the continent's native garb and speaking their native tongue greets you. I first visited Aubervilliers for a play. I walked through "Africa" to the theater and once inside it was as if I had returned to central Paris. Everyone seemed to have come from the posh *arrondissements* in the heart of the city. I told one such Parisian where I lived in Paris, a pleasant neighborhood but not a chic one, and he looked at me for a moment then said "Why?" One of the people whom I was meeting mentioned that he had gotten lost, and asked many different people where the theater was. None of them had heard of it, despite its presence in the middle of their community. This is a prime example of what both Ramadan and Lang characterize



Jacques Toubon directs the tour of the new site of the History of Immigration Museum: colonial administrator's office to your left and right.

as an existing and ignored French communitarianism.

But opinion is split on the merits of "*le communitarisme*" in the immigrant community. I have specifically looked at differences in opinion among sub-Saharan and North Africans. Perhaps the most interesting example is illustrated by two prominent comedians, Rachida Khalil who was born in Morocco, and Dieudonne, the son of a white Frenchwoman and a Cameroonian immigrant. While both poke fun at the way their ethnic groups are treated in France, Dieudonné embraces communitarianism while Ms. Khalil is actively against it. Although she didn't speak about it in the one-woman show I attended at the invitation of a friend of hers, on her website she lists it as one of the things she doesn't like, right after George Bush and Osama bin Laden. Dieudonne, a wildly popular comedian (whose comedy has recently reputedly taken a disturbing anti-Semitic turn) actually launched a bid for president based on his communitarian ideas. He pulled out of the race after failing to receive enough signatures.

I suspect that North Africans are less in favor of communitarianism because of the way various groups are divided when questions of ethnicity arise. If France were a communitarian society, North Africans, sub-Saharan Africans and people from Antilles would likely be lumped together. But as I mentioned in KAD-6, the North African community in France has a much longer history of large numbers in France and has developed what is called a "*beurgoisie*," a combination of the word "*beur*" used to describe Maghrebians in France, and "*bourgeoisie*." North Africans (Arab, Berber or Kabyl) adamantly cling to their difference. But to an American, these distinctions are not so fine.

I recently read a memoir of his family's experience by Abd Samad Moussaoui, the brother of Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called "20th hijacker." The Moussaouis are a French family of Moroccan heritage. Two of the siblings were born in Morocco, Abd Samad and Zacarias were born after they family moved to France. I had seen Zacarias Moussaoui on television many times and always considered him a black man. In America he is automatically thought of as such. But in the memoir his brother recounts their childhood and says that at school in Mulhouse in the Alsace section of France they were called "'dirty niggers" by aboriginal French students. "They didn't make any distinction between Arabs and Blacks; we were simply Not White." He later repeats being called by this insult again and says it "was all the more disturbing because we knew we weren't." One could interpret this as a rejection of the negativity the insult implies, but it becomes obvious that he means they weren't black, they were Arab. Throughout the book, which was written with the aid of a French journalist, Abd Samad Moussaoui, a teacher in Montpellier, bizarrely vacillates between accepting the lump assessment "black" and affirming his and his brother's difference.

In the United States, they would not be as confused.

The Moussaouis would be black—they would be seen, treated and welcomed as black people with all of the concordant benefits, drawbacks and particularities. This is not better or worse but simply different. In fact one black French man I met told me he didn't like living in the United States because people were always reminding him that he was black. "Yes, I'm black but you don't have to remind me all the time," he said. In the United States, particularly for minorities, identity is often a matter of expediency directly related to practical concerns. Therefore, how you are seen is equally if not more important than how you see yourself, which is why the scientific evidence refuting the existence of race doesn't have much impact in the United States. Most people find it interesting but feel it has little to do with real life. This reflected self is antithetical to the French concept of a self that is internally derived. In French culture, the individual through intellectual reason takes on an identity. This way of thinking prioritizes the philosophical over the practical and self-creation over reflected identities. It is an essential difference between the communitarian and the Republican ideals.

On a crisp fall Saturday at the Senat, the building that houses one of France's two legislative bodies, the Employment and Housing Minister, Jean-Louis Borloo, hosted a day-long conference: "Living Together Better." The centerpiece was awarding the annual prizes for "Talent of the Cites," a program that recognizes *banlieuesards* (usually poorer people of color) for the creation of an enterprise or non-profit organization. The closing debate was titled, "The republic tested by the regard of the other." The subject bedevils France's ardent Republicans: in the matter of employment, living conditions, education etc., immigrants, particularly those from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, are living in conditions far worse than other French people. They are "others" in their own country. The title of the session represented a departure from traditional wisdom as technically there are no "others" among citizens of the Republic.

Senators (who are indirectly elected, unlike members of the other parliamentary house — the National Assembly — who are directly elected) did most of the speaking; they agreed that there is a problem of inequality in the country but reached little consensus on how to address it. One, a member of the socialist party, conceded that perhaps positive discrimination on the basis of ethnicity might be theoretically possible within the bounds of the Republic, but not on the basis of religion. Mr. Borloo shook his head as she spoke. It's a curious twist that the centre-right party seems more willing to adapt the idea of the Republic, and soften the hard stance on the separation of religion.



The Senate Takes the Lead

To Muslims and Jews, the second and third largest religious affiliations in France after Catholicism, the insistence on secularism must seem particularly hypocritical when the Christian religion obviously permeates public life. Of the 11 or so national "jours de fetes" (celebration days rather than holy days) in France, more than half are derived from the Christian religion—Assumption Day, Easter Monday, Christmas, etc. And French law refuses to alter the rule mandating that businesses close on Sundays, the day of worship for Christians.

So what is this Republic that allows the majority's religion to penetrate public life, but frowns at any other; that practices a social communitarianism benefiting the majority but demonizes politics among minorities? It sounds much like the majority rule that characterizes a democracy. But as I stated earlier the only thing that defines the republican quality of France other than the lack of a monarch is the reams of paper and countless words the country's politicians and philosophers have spent on the question. "La rentrée" is a fascinating time, showing Paris in what has been its best light, with myriad intellectual and cultural offerings. With the current socio-political situation the time spent in esoteric debate with avowed egalitarians feels surreal. Cocooned in Parisian halls, trading lofty words with mandarins, it is hard to comprehend that in the bleak outer suburbs, there's a riot going on. □

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